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ABSTRACT

This background paper was commissioned to survey the condition of child care in Australia. The first three sections give statistical data on the current patterns of care arrangements and the factors contributing to a demand for expanded and more flexible child care services, i.e., family composition, income, and work arrangements. The next section summarizes the changing role of the Australian federal government since the Child Care Act of 1972 and the variations in state and local government commitment. The last two sections discuss the pros and cons of some important policy questions, i.e., who shall receive government-supported day care, how federal funds should be allocated to local agencies, what proportion of the cost of child care should be borne by parents and by government, what role should be played by commercial daycares and work-related children's centers, and how the wages and conditions of child care workers can be improved. The report closes with nine recommendations for resolving some of these issues. The Australian Labor Party policy on child care, excerpted from the 1982 platform, is appended. (CB)

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Towards a National Child Care Policy

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Foreword

The Institute of Family Studies is a Commonwealth Statutory Authority established under the *Family Law Act* 1975. The Institute began operations in February 1980 and by the beginning of 1981 all staff positions had been filled. It is, first and foremost, a research and information dissemination organisation charged with conducting, encouraging and coordinating research into the factors affecting marital and family stability in Australia. As a result, the Institute has made the impact of public policies on the well-being of families a major focus of its research program.

Each major study conducted will generate data showing how well different types of families are coping under current economic, social and political arrangements. In addition, specific studies will be commissioned which will pinpoint the impact of policies in particular areas such as housing, health and income security.

As preparation for these activities, the Institute has commissioned policy background papers to be written by leading experts in each field. These papers will describe current arrangements in Australia, examine the issues that arise as a result of their operation and canvass alternative policy options. These background papers will serve a number of purposes. First, they will enable specific and more general research studies to focus on important issues and on gathering appropriate data to contribute to policy development. Secondly, they will serve as comprehensive and concise discussions of important policy areas without necessarily advocating any one particular set of policy prescriptions. As a result, they should contribute to a more informed and enlightened debate and serve as reference points for those who wish either to contribute to or simply observe and understand the process of developing appropriate family policies.

The author of this paper, Deborah Brennan, has published in the area of children's services, most recently completing a review of Commonwealth and State policies from 1972 to 1982. She works as a consultant with Social Research and Evaluation Ltd in Sydney and tutors in the Departments of Government and Social Work at Sydney University.

A series of Family Impact Seminars has been organised by the Institute in all States for 1983. The subject of the seminars is **Community Based Services** and this paper, along with others titled '*Services to families*' and '*Social support in an Australian community*', will provide the background for discussion. Presentations by state community welfare departments and by community groups will be made at each seminar.

The Institute has commissioned this paper and organised the seminars in order to present the result of its research, generate comment from informed sources and gauge reaction from the broader community.

The commissioning of papers such as this also requires considerable participation by the staff of the Institute, in the design of the brief, liaison with the author, coordination of Institute input, editing and publishing of the paper and organisation of seminars and general dissemination. Among the many staff who contribute in this way are Frank Maas (Policy Studies) and Mari Davis (Publishing).

The views expressed within the paper do not necessarily represent any official view of the Institute of Family Studies in this area. Rather they are the views of the author which the Institute is pleased to present as contributions to public debate on the provision of children's services.

Don Edgar
Director

Introduction

Child care services are among the most effective support services that governments can provide for families. Good quality child care provides social and educational benefits for children and relieves parents of anxiety about their children's well-being while they are at work, studying or participating in community activities. The availability of child care is of fundamental importance in enabling women to take an active and equal part in society.

At the present time public provision of child care is appallingly low. Official statistics on child care usage do not distinguish between attendance at government funded centres and attendance at commercial centres. Altogether, only 5.5 per cent of Australian children below school age use either of these services as their main form of care. An informed estimate suggests that, at the most, two-thirds of these children would be attending government funded services.(1) This means that only about 3.5 per cent of Australian children below school age are using publicly supported child care facilities (other than sessional pre-schools). Australia lags far behind most similar Western nations in terms of its policy development level of provision, and financial commitment to child care.(2)

Although the Commonwealth government has been involved in this area for over a decade, the lack of explicit policy and planning, combined with the inadequate level of funds allocated to the Children's Services Program, has resulted in an acute shortage of all forms of child care and severe inequities in the distribution of services. The newly elected Labor government faces a major challenge as far as child care is concerned, for what is needed is not simply an expansion of the present system, but the development of a national child care policy.

The formation in 1982 of a National Association of Community Based Child Care made up of representatives from every State

and Territory is likely to intensify public pressure for a more extensive and integrated program. The ALP program states unequivocally that 'access to community child care is a right' and that it is the responsibility of the federal government to fund such services.(3) It remains to be seen how this commitment will be translated into policy and practice.

What is child care?

The term 'child care' refers to a range of facilities which help to meet the needs of children aged 0-15 years for care, educational experiences, social development and recreation. Such services are necessary in modern societies to enable parents to participate in the workforce as well as to be involved in broader community activities and to follow up personal pursuits such as furthering their education. In this paper the term children's services is used synonymously with child care.

Child care services complement the care which children receive from their parents (indeed, care by parents is itself a form of child care deserving of recognition and support from the community). The focus of this paper is on children who are living at home with their parents (or other usual guardians) and who require less than 24 hour a day care. Hence a number of services which could rightly be labelled child care (for example, residential institutions, foster placements, and care within women's refuges) are outside the scope of this discussion. The major service types under consideration are listed below. This listing is not intended to be exhaustive, it is merely intended as a guide for readers of this paper.

Long day care centres

These are sometimes called day nurseries, child minding centres or creches. They are open for a minimum of eight hours per day — usually more — and operate five days a week, forty-eight to fifty weeks of the year. A few centres take children from six weeks of age but most do not accept them below two or three years of age. Long day care centres may be either Commonwealth funded or commercial.

- **Commonwealth funded** centres receive subsidies towards the wages of approved staff and additional subsidies to enable the fees of low income families to be reduced or waived. These centres must give priority to the children of single parents, recently arrived migrants, families where both parents work and others considered to be in special need.
- **Commercial centres** (sometimes also called profit-making or private centres) are run as businesses and do not receive subsidies from the Commonwealth government. They must however comply with State or Territory regulations governing staff/child ratios, qualifications of staff, and space. (In New South Wales, centres licensed for fewer than thirty children are not required to employ any trained staff. Most private centres are licensed for twenty-nine or fewer children.)

Pre-schools or kindergartens

Pre-schools or kindergartens cater for children in the year before school entry and most children attend between three and eight half day sessions per week. They are usually staffed by trained teachers and operate during school terms only. Some provide care from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., but this is not common. On the whole, pre-schools are not suitable for the children of working mothers unless the mother has a (very) part-time job and can make other arrangements, or stop working, during school holidays.

Family day care

This is a form of supervised, home-based care in which women care for children in their own homes and are supported by regular visits from trained staff. Children aged from birth to middle primary school age are catered for. The caregivers work through a sponsoring agency which takes responsibility for their recruitment and selection and for matching them with families in need of care.

Neighbourhood children's centres

These are small centres which usually operate in converted houses and are run by committees of parents and staff. They aim to offer a range of services to families with young children according to local needs. The care offered ranges from occasional or emergency care through to longer, more regular forms of care. Playgroups, coffee mornings and other informal support services are often organised through neighbourhood children's centres.

Work related children's centres

These are located at or near an industrial or commercial area, an industrial estate, a factory or business, or any other workplace such as a hospital or university.

Occasional or casual care

This service provides care for young children for short periods of time, usually no more than three hours per week or twelve hours per month.

Out-of-school-hours care

This is a general term referring to services provided for young school children outside of regular school hours. The main services in this category are:

- before-school programs
- after-school programs
- holiday programs.

Private minding

Many children are cared for by neighbours, relatives and friends in informal, unlicensed arrangements. This care is, by its very nature, unsupervised and varies in quality from the highest to the abysmally poor. Private child minders receive no support from governments and authorities tend to ignore (or even deny) their existence.

Current patterns of care arrangements

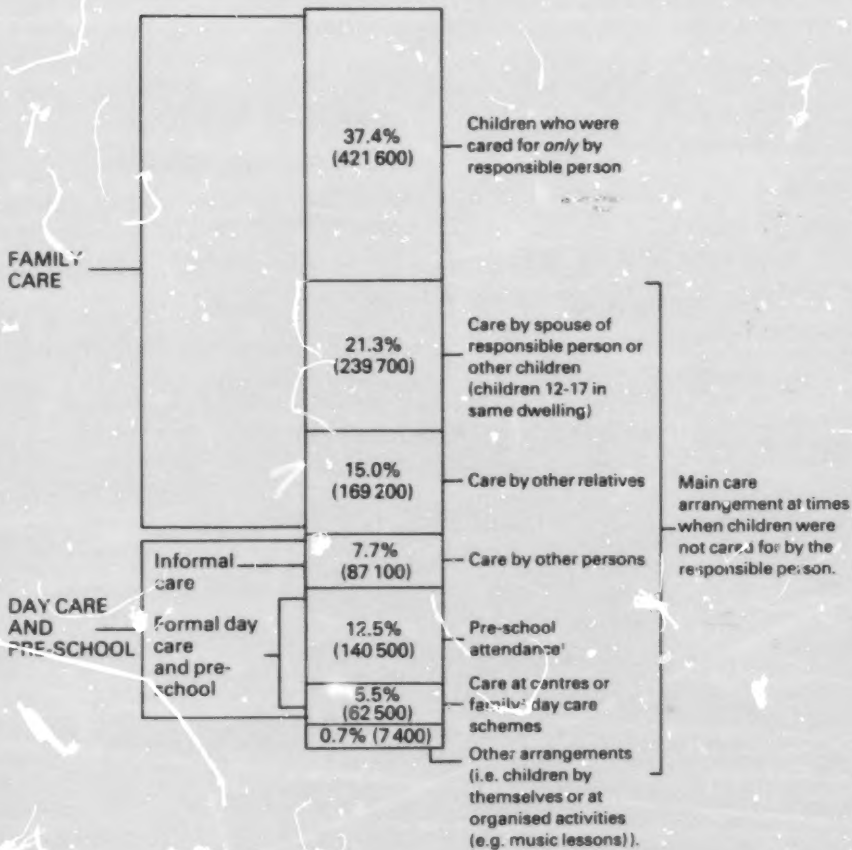
Very few children in Australia have access to organised child care services.(4) A survey of *Child care arrangements* conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 1980 has shown that, of the 1 128 000 children below school age, only 5.5 per cent use either day care centres or family day care schemes as their main form of care. This includes children attending communal centres. Of the 5.5 per cent, about two-thirds are in Commonwealth sponsored services — representing about 3.5 per cent of children not yet attending school. A further 12.5 per cent use pre-schools, giving a total of 18 per cent of children in this age group who use formal services as their main form of care.

What happens to the remaining 82 per cent? Almost half a million, or 44 per cent are looked after by relatives, friends and neighbours.(5) Slightly over one-third are cared for exclusively by their mothers. Alarming, 5300 children below school age are left unattended.(6)

In spite of the dearth of formal child care facilities, 33.6 per cent of those responsible for children below school age are in the labour force. Almost 300 000 pre-school children have both parents (or their sole parent) at work. One-third of these children are the responsibility of parents in full-time employment.

It has sometimes been suggested that the children of working parents (particularly full-time working parents) have benefited disproportionately from Commonwealth funding for children's services and that the more numerous children of 'at home' mothers are discriminated against. The facts are otherwise. The 1980 survey showed that only 1 per cent (approximately 15 000) of Australian pre-schoolers receive care in a centre or family day care scheme for thirty or more hours per week — exactly the same proportion as in 1969 (i.e. before federal funding began). Of the children attending day care centres 70.8 per cent attend for less

Figure 1 Main care arrangements for children not yet attending school — 1980 Australian Bureau of Statistics Child Care Survey

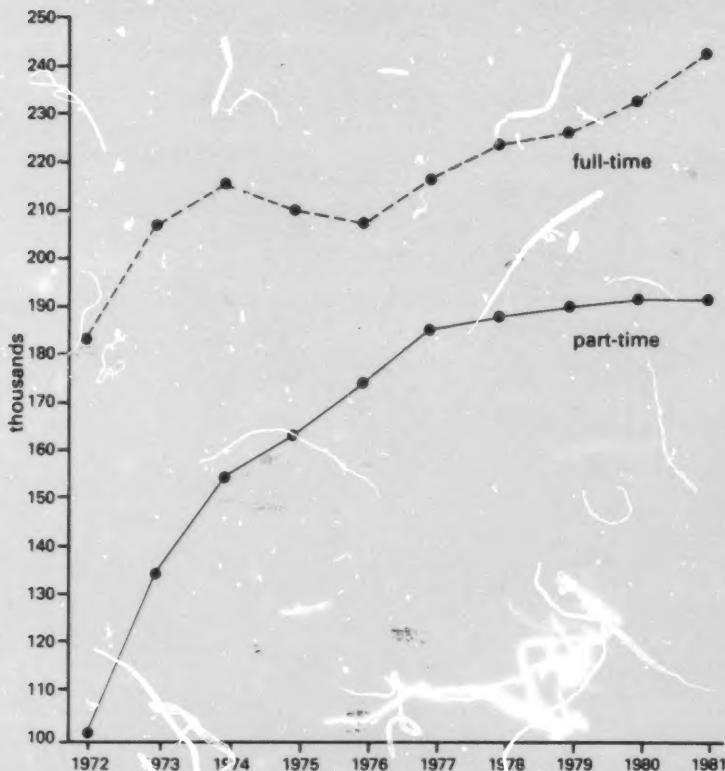


¹ The total number of children, not yet attending school, who used pre-schools at any stage during the survey week was 168 700.

² The total number of children, not yet attending school, who attended formal child care services at any stage during the survey week was 50 500.

Source: Office of Child Care, 'The Commonwealth and the Provision of Pre-School and Day Care Services' in Australian Early Childhood Association, *Being and Becoming*, Proceedings of the 16th National Conference, Hobart: AECA, 1982, p.303.

than twenty hours per week and 91.5 per cent of children attending pre-schools do so for less than twenty hours per week. Yet almost 100 000 children have both their parents in full-time employment.

Figure 2 Married females aged 25-34 in full-time and part-time employment

Sources: Australian Bureau of Statistics, *The labour force Australia 1978*, Cat. no. 6204.0
 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *The labour force Australia 1980*, Cat. no. 6204.0
 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *The labour force Australia, November 1981*, Cat. no. 6203.0

Another erroneous belief is that the number of full-time working mothers has declined over the last decade and that the need for full-time care has declined. This is not the case — although the proportion of full-time to part-time working mothers has declined, the numbers of both have actually risen:

Child care problems do not disappear when children reach school age. With just under half the mothers of primary school aged children in the workforce there is a great need for services which provide care and activities outside of school hours and during holidays. Yet only 1 per cent of Australian families with children in this age bracket use centre-based or family day care.

Parents' labour force status has a significant influence on what type of care children are likely to experience. Children with both

Table 1 Labour force participation rates of persons responsible for pre-school and primary school aged children, by States and Territories

	Labour force participation rate			
	Responsible for children under 6 years	Responsible for children aged 6-11 years and some under 6 years	Responsible only for children aged 6 to 11 years	Responsible for any children under 12 years
	%	%	%	%
New South Wales	32.7	47.7	55.5	42.0
Victoria	36.3	51.1	57.1	45.2
Queensland	32.1	47.1	54.6	41.2
South Australia	31.5	45.9	53.8	41.2
Western Australia	33.8	49.8	57.1	43.5
Tasmania	30.0	44.4	50.0	37.9
Northern Territory	43.3	66.3	70.2	53.7
ACT	33.3	60.0	73.4	48.4
Australia	33.6	48.8	56.1	42.9

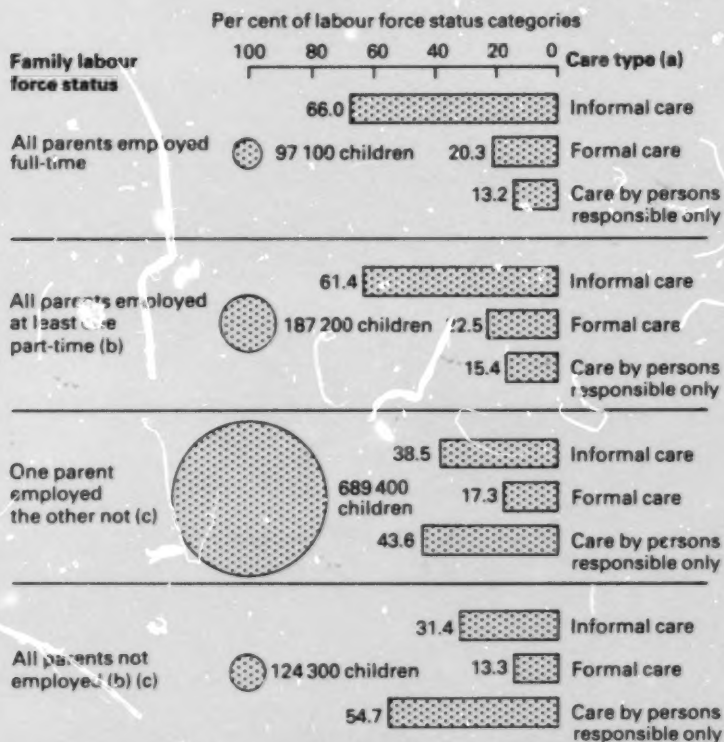
Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Child care arrangements Australia June 1980*. Cat. no. 4402.0, p. 19.

parents (or their sole parent) employed are far more likely to be in an informal care arrangement. Sixty-six per cent of children with parents employed full-time are in informal care, but in families with one parent at work and one at home only 38.5 per cent use informal child care.

There is a similar relationship between how many forms of care children experience in a week and whether their mothers are in employment. In two working parent families 54 per cent of children attend two or more kinds of child care a week, compared with 36 per cent in households where there is one parent at home and one at work. The fact that so many children in both groups are using two or more forms of care suggests that services are not geared to the needs of these families. Many parents are obliged to put together a patchwork of arrangements because no single service is adequate for their requirements.

Other studies have confirmed this pattern of multiple service usage. A study of occasional care centres in New South Wales showed that more than a quarter of the users of this service also attended at least one other form of publicly funded care and some attended up to four services.⁽⁷⁾ This finding throws into question any discussion of the total numbers of children using publicly funded care which assumes that each child uses only one form of service. The Australian Bureau of Statistics has also urged caution in this regard, and it is for this reason that the Bureau does not attempt to add the users of pre-school to the users of child care to derive total users.

**Figure 3 Children under 12 years of age not attending school:
Family labour force status by care type, June 1980**



(a) Although not defined as care in this survey, the category 'care by person responsible' has been included in this diagram for ease of analysis.

(b) Note that children of one parent families are counted in 'All parents...' depending on that parent's labour force status.

(c) Comprises unemployed persons and those not in the labour force.

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Child care arrangements Australia June 1980*, p. 7.

As this discussion suggests, there is still a massive unmet demand for child care. A study of discouraged workers in 1981 revealed that 120 000 women would like a job if child care were available.⁽⁸⁾ Because of the lack of child care, however, they were not actively seeking work and are thus not regarded as unemployed in official statistics. In addition to these, there are over a quarter of a million women not actively seeking work because of 'family considerations'.⁽⁹⁾

Figures relating to parental employment provide an obvious and measurable index of the need for child care. However,

research carried out over the last decade has shown that practically all parents — whether they are employed or not — would like to have access to substitute care services for their young children.⁽¹⁰⁾ People seek access to child care for a wide variety of reasons: they may, for example, need time to study or re-train, to learn English or to pursue a particular hobby or interest. Many mothers whose major occupation is looking after small children and caring for a home simply need a break and some time to themselves. But by far the most common single reason given for seeking access to child care (other than parents' employment) is the benefit it provides for children. Many parents strongly desire their children to have opportunities to play with other children and to develop social skills. The opportunity for children to meet and form attachments to adults outside the family is another common motivation.

The case for expanding the level of provision

'Families aren't what they used to be!'

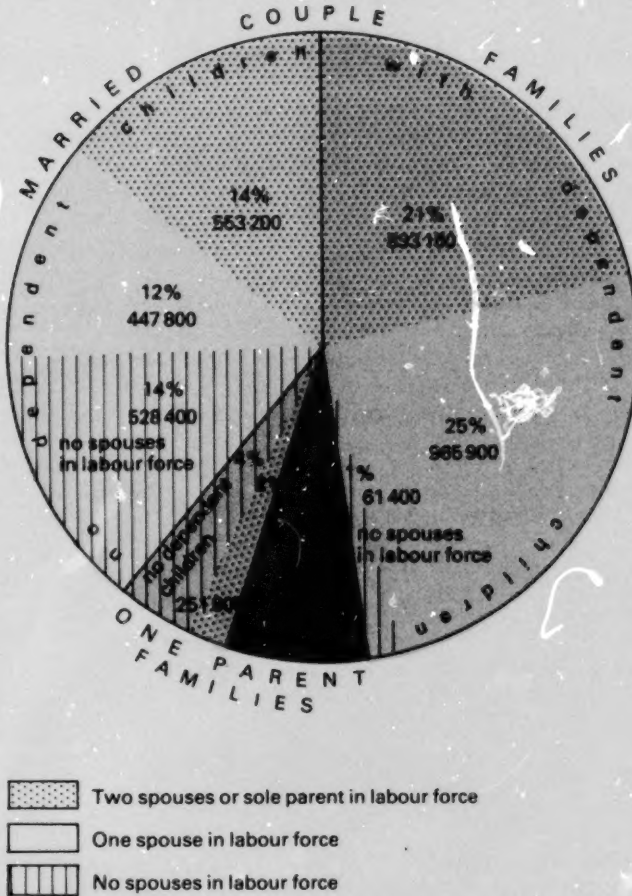
The needs and problems of families with young children today are vastly different from those of previous generations. Yet the social and economic changes since World War II which transformed the patterns of Australian family life, have not had a major impact on the thinking of governments and bureaucracies about child care. There is still a tendency to regard children's services as a threat to the family rather than as a supportive service.

Australian children and their parents live in a wide variety of household arrangements. The stereotype which depicts the 'average family' as one comprised of a male breadwinner, a dependent (i.e. non-employed) wife and children is misleading. Only 25 per cent of Australian families fit this picture. As Figure 4 shows almost half the mothers of dependent children are in the work-force. A further 13 per cent of households are headed by a single parent (usually a woman). Between 1975 and 1980 there was a 60 per cent increase in the number of lone parents responsible for children below school age.(11) Yet many services continue to be based on the assumption that all mothers are at home during the day, are able and willing to perform regular unpaid duties and can make do with three or four half-day sessions of care a week. (There are 4306 sessional pre-schools throughout Australia compared with 512 day care centres.)

The need for two incomes

Between 1969 and 1980 the labour force participation rate of those responsible for children under twelve years of age rose from 29 per cent to 43 per cent.(12) This has been a steady trend

Figure 4 Australian families, 1981



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Labour force status and other characteristics of families Australia 1981*, Cat. no. 6224.0

for the past eleven years. *The recession has not diminished the proportion of mothers at work*; indeed the combined impact of inflation, rising prices and the reduction in real wages that has occurred since the mid 1970s has made it increasingly important for many families to have two incomes.

False assumptions abound concerning women's economic role within the family. For instance, it is widely believed that men are always the family breadwinners and that women work only for pin-money or the purchase of luxuries. Such views are not supported by evidence. In Australia only one out of every three

women is fully supported by a man.(13) In 1975 the first main report of the Australian Government Commission of Inquiry into Poverty (the Henderson Report) found that the number of families in poverty would double if wives did not work. Women's wages are necessary to enable families to maintain an average standard of living.

The earnings of women on low wages are especially likely to form a substantial part of household income. One study of married women production workers in Melbourne found that in most cases their wages constituted between 40 per cent and 60 per cent of the family income.(14)

Another way of gauging the importance of women's earnings is to look at the changes which take place in household expenditure patterns when women lose their jobs. A study of unemployed women conducted by the Council of Social Service of New South Wales revealed that the loss of a mother's job caused many families to cut back on basic items such as meat, fruit, vegetables, bread and milk.(15)

Mothers at home and mothers at work

The vast majority of mothers spend some time in the workforce before their children start school. Although at any given time only about one-third of the mothers of pre-schoolers will be employed, most women alternate between being at home and being at work: there is no clear division between 'at home' and 'working' mothers.(16) This fact has important implications for child care policy. For example, it illustrates the futility of attempting to provide one kind of service for the children of mothers in paid employment and another for children whose mothers are at home. Most mothers are likely to change their workforce status back and forth several times before their children start school.

This intermittent pattern of workforce participation by women is one index of their vulnerability in the labour market. The fact that women are defined primarily as wives and mothers and only secondarily as workers has a great impact on the kinds of work they do, the hours they work and the pay they receive. Child-bearing and child-rearing — because of the social, economic and ideological structures which surround them in our society — are major barriers to women's employment and hence to their economic independence.

Part-time work — the solution to child care problems?

Part-time work(17) is sometimes put forward as the ideal solution to the difficulties of women who are trying to juggle work and

family commitments. Many women already work part-time including a majority of those with young children. Why is this so? Part-time work is sought by some mothers because they do not wish to be employed for a full week and are able to manage with less than a full wage. Others seek short hours precisely because there is no adequate child care available that would enable them to take a full-time job.

Thus the subject of part-time work needs to be approached with caution. Given that most part-time work is insecure, poorly paid and not part of promotion structures, it can easily become a trap for women. To advocate the extension of part-time work also ignores the harsh economic reality faced by many families. Women who are forced to work part-time because there are no full-time jobs or because they are unable to find suitable care for their children may pay for their choice by severe financial hardship. Class factors are important here. The earnings of a part-time teacher, social worker or librarian may be as much as (or even more than) the full-time wage of a process worker, shop assistant or domestic. For many women in the latter categories 'part-time work means part-time unemployment'. (18)

It is true that most married women who work part-time state that they do not wish to work longer hours. However, 'this is a preference expressed within the context of the present sexual division of labour in which women retain the major responsibility for child care'. (19) For anyone concerned about increasing the involvement of fathers in child rearing a shorter working week for all, not part-time work for women, must be the goal.

Single parents

A high proportion of Australian children will spend some years in a single parent household. No firm figures are available for this country, but in the United States it has been estimated that 50 per cent of children will spend five or six years in a one-parent home. (20) The increase in the number of single parent families is one of the major social trends underlying the need for an expansion of child care facilities. Single parent families, particularly those headed by women, are one of the groups most vulnerable to poverty. Employment is likely to be the only way that they can escape from the poverty trap, but employment is extremely difficult to organise in the absence of child care.

Almost 30 per cent of single parents in a recent Australian study stated that the lengthy waiting lists, high cost or geographical inaccessibility of child care centres prevented them from making use of these services. (21)

Quite apart from adults' needs, however, attendance at some kind of children's centre or program can provide an alternative

source of emotional security for the young child. Although divorce is not necessarily traumatic for the children involved (on the contrary it may end years of conflict and distress), nevertheless it is reasonable to suggest that for those children who are thrown emotionally off balance by their parents separation, the relationships formed with adults and other children in a child care setting may be a source of comfort and stability.

Migrant families

The particular needs of migrant families have not yet been recognised in Australia's child care policies. Although 25 per cent of Australians were either born in a non-English speaking country or have at least one parent born in a non-English speaking country, children's services tend to be inaccessible, inappropriate and culturally irrelevant to this section of the population. Only 0.9 per cent of the children of non-British immigrants attend Commonwealth sponsored children's services, compared with 3.5 per cent of Australian children overall.(22)

Migrant women have a higher rate of workforce participation than their Australian counterparts, but the lack of child care facilities in this country forces many of them to make unsatisfactory and, frequently, distressing arrangements for their children. Many have had to send babies and young children back to their home countries to be cared for by relatives. Other 'solutions' which these families have been forced to adopt include working alternate shifts from their partner or leaving children at home unattended.

Migrant women who remain outside the workforce frequently suffer isolation and poverty. A study of migrant women conducted in Sydney found that 63 per cent of those at home wanted jobs but could not look for work because of the lack of child care.(23)

Existing children's services tend to perpetuate the cultural exclusion of migrants and Aboriginal people. There is a great need to employ staff who speak languages other than English and who have a variety of cultural and ethnic backgrounds. In this way all children can recognise the multi-cultural nature of our society, and those from other countries can be encouraged to feel pride in their ethnic identity. A major step towards this goal would be to recognise the qualifications of people who have gained early childhood credentials in other countries and to employ them as fully trained staff rather than relegating them to the status of 'ethnic aides'.

Small families and social isolation

The average family today has two children — one hundred years ago it had seven! (24) Because families are smaller and more

closely spaced, most children lack the experience of being cared for by older sisters and brothers and, in turn, taking responsibility for younger ones. Attending a child care centre can provide the opportunity to meet and mix with children of a range of ages — from small babies to primary school aged children.

Another aspect of the trend towards smaller families is that many young adults have had no experience of observing children's growth and development before they themselves become parents. Many have not even held a baby in their arms before they are presented with their own!(25) This lack of experience makes raising children far more worrying and burdensome than otherwise, and increases parents' — particularly mothers' — feelings of isolation and incompetence.

Quite a number of today's young mothers were born in the 1960s and are themselves the products of small nuclear families. Often they are concentrated in suburban housing estates or in blocks of high-rise flats cut off from their mothers, grandmothers, sisters and aunts — the traditional sources of child rearing advice and support. In these circumstances a children's service provides more than child care, it can be a focal point for parents to meet together and is often a centre for arranging babysitting, playgroups, school pick-ups and various other kinds of informal support.

The needs of children

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s the development of child care services in many Western nations was held back by the maternal deprivation theory which claimed that small children have a biological need to form an intense bond with their mothers. This bond could only develop properly, it was claimed, if children received the exclusive and devoted care of their mothers for the first five years. Attendance at a day care centre (or even a playgroup in extreme versions of the theory) could disrupt the bond and subject children to the risk of grave psychological damage. More recent writers such as Penelope Leach and Selma Fraiberg have opposed child care centres on similar grounds.(26)

The maternal deprivation theory is popularly associated with the work of John Bowlby and opponents of day care have frequently invoked his research to support their position. However, Bowlby's work has little relevance to children living in their own homes and attending day care centres. He was concerned with children living in hospitals and residential institutions who had been separated from their entire families usually under traumatic circumstances such as war. Bowlby sometimes used day care children as the control group whose development he considered normal.(27)

Bowlby's work has had a beneficial effect on the practices of staff in residential care nurseries and hospitals — overnight stays and extended visiting by parents in children's hospitals are a direct outcome of his work. However the attempt to apply the maternal deprivation theory to ordinary families in ordinary circumstances has had bizarre consequences. For example, it has been estimated that between 20 per cent and 50 per cent of children surrendered to State institutions in New South Wales could have remained with their families if adequate child care facilities had been available. (28) Likewise, as mentioned earlier, the lack of child care facilities has meant that many migrants have been forced to send their children back to the home country until they reach school age.

The appalling irony here is that opposition to the establishment of child care services on the grounds that children should not be separated from their mothers for a few hours a day has directly contributed to many children being separated from their entire families for years at a stretch, and in some cases forever.

The idea that babies and small children need constant care by their mothers is extremely ethnocentric and ignores the great range of child rearing practices throughout history and across different cultures. Many countries similar to our own (such as France, Israel and Denmark) have extensive traditions of out of home care for children. It would be difficult to argue that such countries have bred a majority of citizens who are deprived, affectionless adults incapable of forming close relationships.

The assumption that children's psychological development is essentially determined within the family (particularly by the relationship with parents) is by no means universally shared. The relationships which a young child forms with other children and with adults outside the family are accorded great significance in other cultures. (29) Likewise the family's access to adequate income, housing, health and social services is seen as far more important to a child's upbringing than the twenty-four hour presence of a devoted mother.

Eva Cox has suggested that children reared solely in nuclear families where they are largely dependent upon one adult to meet all their needs are likely to suffer *social deprivation* rather than maternal deprivation.

Very young children are capable of multiple bonding — in simple terms, of making friends with a range of people. They particularly love the company of older children. And yet they are often isolated with mother at home for many hours of the day, most days of the week, in the interests of 'good childcare'. (30)

It is often physically impossible for a mother at home to meet the needs of demanding small children while attending to the domestic chores. Lack of space is a common problem. Many families live in small houses or flats which do not have gardens or accessible

public parks. Other difficulties may be less obvious. Not all families can afford the toys, books and games which others take for granted as a normal part of childhood — much less the sandpits, paddling pools and swings which well-off children may enjoy at home. Attendance at a child care centre does not 'deprive' children; for many it provides not only educational benefits but also opportunities for companionship, imaginative play and loud and messy games which could not possibly be enjoyed in their own homes.

The role of governments

The basis of Federal government involvement

The involvement of the Commonwealth government in a program of direct funding for children's services began in 1972 when the McMahon Liberal Government introduced the *Child Care Act*. Until then the provision of children's services had been left to voluntary agencies and commercial interests although some State governments had provided limited assistance to community groups seeking to establish kindergartens or pre-schools.

The impetus for the *Child Care Act* came mainly from developments taking place within the economy which were creating an unprecedented demand for female labour. The government explained the purpose of the Act by stating that child care centres would contribute to employee morale, reduce absenteeism and assist productivity.(31)

The *Child Care Act* of 1972 remains the only legislative basis for funding children's services in Australia. Yet it is totally inappropriate for funding the flexible, locally controlled services which many parents are seeking. The Act was designed to provide subsidies to non-profit organisations (mainly the established voluntary agencies and local government authorities) which provided care for the children of working mothers and single parents. Its provisions relate exclusively to centre-based services with professionally trained staff. Services such as neighbourhood children's centres, family day care schemes and out-of-school-hours care cannot be funded under the *Child Care Act*. Not even pre-schools fall under its provisions. These services receive funds either through block grant payments to the States or under ministerially determined guidelines. This means that the funding and administration of children's services is excessively fragmented and that most forms of care (i.e. everything except centre-based long day care) have no secure basis in legislation.(32)

The Labor government of 1972-75 accepted that the Commonwealth should assume overall responsibility for the provision of children's services. It proposed the establishment of a Children's Commission which was to be the major policy-making, funding and administrative body concerned with child care. This Commission was to oversee the setting up of a network of facilities aimed at meeting the needs of all children and all parents — not merely those defined as in some way disadvantaged. Labor's commitment was that by 1980 'all children in Australia [would] have access to services designed to take care of their physical, social and recreational needs.'⁽³³⁾ Labor recognised that the *Child Care Act* of 1972 was inappropriate as the basis of its new policies. It intended to repeal the Act and replace it with new legislation (the Children's Commission Act (1975)). The new Act passed through both houses of parliament, but had not been proclaimed by the time of Labor's dismissal.

The Liberal government which held office from late 1975 until 1983 based its approach to children's services on two premises which were fundamentally at odds with the aims of the previous administration. The first of these was that the States, and not the Commonwealth, should have primary responsibility for children's services. The second was that child care should not be seen as a service for ordinary families but should be restricted to those whom the government defined as being in need.⁽³⁴⁾ The government's decision in mid-1976 to set up the Office of Child Care within the Department of Social Security (rather than to proceed with an independent Children's Commission) symbolised this view of child care as a residual welfare service rather than a community right.

One of the major issues for the Hawke Labor government as far as child care is concerned will be to develop clear policies concerning the role it envisages for the Commonwealth in planning and funding these services. The government has inherited a program which has been moulded according to a philosophy of child care fundamentally at odds with that of the Labor party; it has also inherited the administrative structures of the previous government. Developing policies and structures appropriate to Labor's conception of the Commonwealth's role in child care is therefore a fundamental task.

Federal funding issues

Federal funding has been the central focus of public concern regarding child care in recent years. The level of expenditure, the particular service types which have been funded, and the inequitable distribution of Federal funds among the States and Territories have been the main issues.

Table 2 Commonwealth expenditure on children's services, 1975-83

<i>Financial year</i>	<i>Actual expenditure</i>	<i>Actual exp. converted to 1982/83 prices*</i>	<i>Actual exp. as a % of 1975/76 exp. in real terms</i>
	<i>\$m</i>	<i>\$m</i>	<i>%</i>
1975-76	63.970	125.925	100
1976-77	67.086	117.695	93
1977-78	71.197	115.019	91
1978-79	63.836	97.015	77
1979-80	69.226	96.281	76
1980-81	74.034	91.740	73
1981-82	80.360	89.289	71
1982-83	103.130	103.130	82

* Conversion to 1981-82 prices has been performed by applying the public expenditure deflator.

Source: Expenditure figures are from Department of Social Security. *Annual report 1981-82*. Canberra: AGPS, 1982, p. 143.

If there is to be any semblance of equality in the level of provision and the standard of child care across Australia then the Federal government must assume major responsibility for funding. With the exception of pre-school education this is clearly an area which the States see as a Federal responsibility (see next section). Since 1976, however, the Federal government's allocation to children's services has been substantially reduced (see Table 2).

To put the actual expenditure into perspective, it is instructive to recall that in 1974 the Social Welfare Commission recommended that \$885 million be spent between 1974 and 1980 to enable 38 per cent of Australian children to have access to a range of children's services by 1980.⁽³⁵⁾ Actual expenditure in that period was \$380.5 million (or 43 per cent of the suggested amount).⁽³⁶⁾ We have become accustomed to 'thinking small' when it comes to child care and perhaps the idea of spending \$885 million over a six year period sounds unrealistic — yet is less than the current annual expenditure on the dependent spouse rebate!⁽³⁷⁾ Australia can surely afford to spend more on children's services; at present the only OECD countries which spend less are Spain, Portugal and Turkey.

What impact have the expenditure reductions in recent years had on particular types of children's services? Given that funding for pre-schools and funding for other forms of child care are treated as two distinct components of the Children's Services Program, it is necessary to consider each area separately in order to assess the significance of Federal cutbacks.

Pre-schools

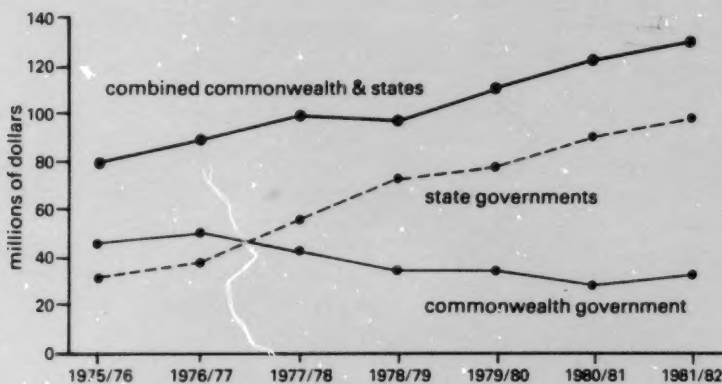
Since January 1977, the Commonwealth government's recurrent assistance to pre-schools has been paid through block grants to

each of the States.⁽³⁸⁾ This means that instead of funding each pre-school directly, the Commonwealth allocates a lump sum (or block grant) to each State and this money is distributed according to guidelines laid down by the Commonwealth. The block grants have never been indexed and their real value has declined sharply since they were introduced. Further, no capital funds for pre-schools have been provided by the Commonwealth since June 1978.

However, Federal withdrawal from the funding of pre-school education has not had the dire consequences which some have feared since all State governments have increased their contributions enormously. The State governments are now the major financial sponsors of pre-school education throughout Australia. In 1975/76 the Commonwealth government contributed 60 per cent of total national funding for pre-schools and the States contributed 40 per cent. By 1981/82 the respective contributions had become 25 per cent and 75 per cent. Figure 5 illustrates this shift in the sources of pre-school funding.

The distribution of the Commonwealth block grant for pre-schools is highly inequitable. The level of expenditure in each of the States varies from \$87.09 per capita in New South Wales to \$228.15 in Western Australia. Clearly New South Wales is particularly disadvantaged. Although 36 per cent of Australian children in the year before school entry live in New South Wales, the State receives only 22 per cent of the block grant.

Figure 5 Expenditure on pre-schools, Commonwealth and all State governments, 1975/76-1981/82



Sources: Commonwealth figures from the Department of Social Security *Annual report 1981-82*, p. 142. State figures provided by relevant authorities.

Table 3 Distribution of Commonwealth block grant for pre-schools to the States and the Northern Territory, 1981-82

State	No. of 4 year olds	% of total 4 year olds	Amount of block grant \$	% of block grant	Commonwealth expenditure per 4 year old \$m
NSW	81 865	36	7 130 000	22	87.09
Vic.	61 385	27	8 930 000	27	145.47
Qld.	34 942	15	6 605 000	20	189.03
SA	19 157	9	3 730 000	11	194.71
WA	21 302	9	4 860 000	15	228.15
Tas.	6 690	3	1 410 000	4	210.76
NT	2 694	1	340 000	1	126.21*
ACT	Does not receive share of block grant				
Total	229 035	100	33 005 000	100	—

* Significant additional Commonwealth funds are made available through the Northern Territory's Department of Education.

Sources: Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Estimated age distribution of the population: States and Territories of Australia* 30 June 1980. Cat. no. 3201.0

Department of Social Security, *Annual Report 1981-82*, Table 82, p. 142.

The funding of pre-schools in the Territories is a separate matter. The Northern Territory receives a small share of the block grant but significant additional Commonwealth funds are made available to it through the Northern Territory Department of Education. Pre-schools in the Australian Capital Territory are funded through the ACT Schools Authority.

Child care and related services

Until the mid-1970s almost all expenditure on children's services was directed towards either long day care centres or pre-schools. There was very little funding for family day care, out of school hours care, or any other kinds of services. Under the Liberal government however the non pre-school section of the Children's Services Program was used to fund an ever-widening range of services. Furthermore, the target group of the Program was extended from 0-12-year-old children to cover the entire 0-18-year-old age range and their families. In short, this part of the program became a 'general welfare slush fund' (39) used to cover almost any kind of service which could be described as supportive of families. Thus, welfare rights officers, community information centres and various kinds of research projects have all been funded from the child care budget.

These trends are illustrated in Figures 6a and 6b which show the distribution of funds within the non pre-school sector of the

Commonwealth program in 1975/76 and 1981/82. It is clear (from these Figures) that centre-based day care expenditure as a proportion of this part of the program declined dramatically under the previous government. Day care expenditure was reduced from 87 per cent to 45 per cent of this component of the overall program.

The major area of growth has been in family day care which rose from a tiny 3.4 per cent in 1975/76 to 23.3 per cent in 1981/82. It has been estimated that between 1976 and 1981 the Commonwealth government established approximately 1500 centre-based child care places compared with 10000 family day care places. (40)

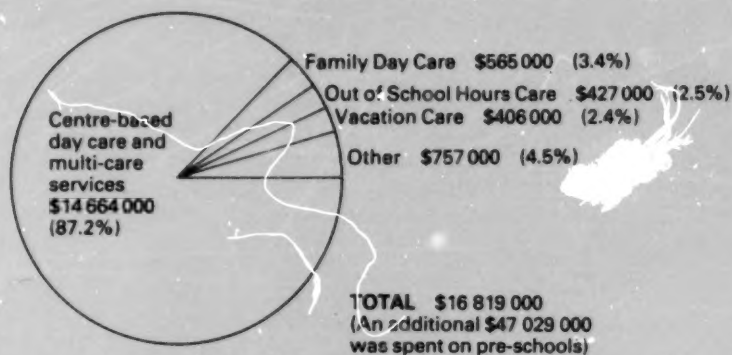
As with the funds for pre-schools, Commonwealth funds for child care and related services are quite inequitably distributed. Children in Western Australia and New South Wales received, respectively, \$37.20 and \$38.25 per capita in the previous financial year while children in the Commonwealth's territories received around about twice as much. This may well be a reflection of the Liberal government's view that State governments should be responsible for the provision of child care. This discriminatory pattern of expenditure needs to be remedied by increasing the government's total allocation to children's services and not simply by redistributing the existing allocation, because even those parts of Australia which are comparatively well funded have serious gaps and shortages in their level of provision.

Variations in State government commitment

Most State governments have made a very sharp distinction between pre-schools and other types of child care. The State governments have more than made up for the decline in Commonwealth expenditure in the pre-school area: for every dollar spent by the Commonwealth on pre-schools, the State governments combined spend three dollars. However there are enormous differences between the States in their level of support for pre-school. Table 5 shows that per capita assistance varies from \$121 per child in New South Wales to \$802 per child in Queensland.

With regard to services other than pre-school the situation is more complex. **New South Wales** stands out as the most progressive State in terms of its policies, although for historical reasons it has the lowest level of child care provision in Australia. The New South Wales government provides 20 per cent of the award wages of staff required to meet minimum licensing requirements in community based centres. Centres funded under the *Child Care Act* in New South Wales thus receive 75 per cent of

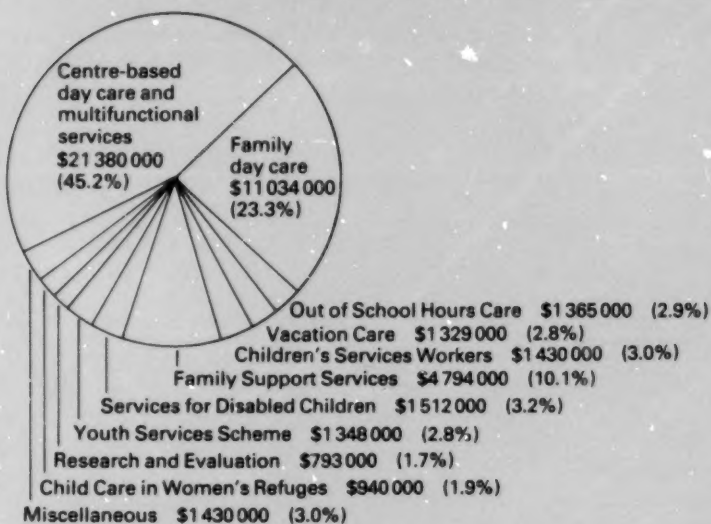
Figure 6a Distribution of funds within non pre-school sector of Commonwealth Children's Services Program, 1975/76



Source: Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates (House of Representatives), 3 December 1976, p.3278.

Note: Figures refer to whole of Australia.

Figure 6b Distribution of funds within the non pre-school sector of the Commonwealth Children's Services Program, 1981/82



Source: Office of Child Care Information Sheet distributed at A.E.C.A. Conference, Hobart, 1982.

Note: Figures refer to whole of Australia.

Note: An additional \$33 005 000 was spent by the Commonwealth on pre-schools in this financial year — thus pre-schools are still the largest single component of overall funding.

Table 4 Distribution of Commonwealth expenditure on other children's services, 1981-82

State	No. of 0-4 year olds	% of 0-4 year olds	Amount of Commonwealth funds \$	% of Comm. funds	Commonwealth expenditure per 0-4 year old \$
NSW	394 268	33	15 081 000	32	38.25
Vic.	296 656	27	12 018 000	25	40.51
Qld.	172 067	15	7 827 000	17	45.49
SA	93 357	8	3 938 000	8	42.18
WA	104 286	9	3 879 000	8	37.20
Tas.	33 484	3	1 869 000	4	55.82
NT	14 192	1	1 130 000	2	79.62
ACT	22 551	2	1 613 000	3	71.53
Total	1 130 861	100	47 355 000	100	—

Sources: Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Estimated age distribution of the population: States and Territories of Australia* 30 June 1980. Cat. no. 3201.0

Department of Social Security, *Annual Report 1981-82*, Table 83, p. 142

N.B. Expenditure figures include some amount for services directed at children in older age groups (e.g. vacation and out of school hours programs). However, as Figure 6b shows, the amount is very small. The Office of Child Care is unable to provide State by State breakdowns of expenditure by service type, hence it is not possible to make calculations which exclude expenditure on older children except on an Australia-wide basis.

Table 5 Per capita State government assistance to pre-schools 1981-82

	\$
New South Wales	121
Victoria	418
Queensland	802
South Australia	675
Western Australia	580
Tasmania	421

Source: D. Brennan, *Children's services in Australia: the state of play*, Sydney: FACSA, 1982.

their salaries from the Office of Child Care plus 20 per cent from the State government. In addition, through its Children's Services Fund set up on 1979, New South Wales provides capital and recurrent funds for the establishment of children's centres. The State government also funds Community Child Care (which, unlike its Victorian counterpart, receives no federal funding). New South Wales is the only State which has made a commitment to matching Commonwealth funds for vacation care on a dollar for dollar basis. Finally, in a joint venture with the Office of Child

Care, the Land Co-ordination Unit of New South Wales is providing land for the development of new services in western Sydney and these are being constructed by the Department of Public Works on the basis of need rather than in response to submissions.

The **Victorian** government's policies with regard to child care are currently under review. A committee has been appointed by the Cain government to make recommendations about the way in which services should be planned in Victoria. The committee is focusing on the principles on which services for children under school age should be based; ways in which existing services could be changed or improved; and the question of which levels of government should be responsible for particular aspects of service delivery such as funding, management and administration. The committee is due to report to the Ministers of Health, Education and Welfare in mid 1983.

At present Victoria is the only State other than New South Wales which makes a direct contribution to child care funding. This is done through subsidies to thirty-six day nurseries which are mainly located in the inner suburbs of Melbourne. Access to these services is means-tested and a very high proportion of the children attending are from single parent homes. These State subsidised day nurseries have come under considerable criticism because of their lack of parent management. Vacation care receives only token funding from the Victorian government and after school programs receive no funding.

In **South Australia** from 1974 until mid 1982 the Childhood Services Council was the main coordinating and planning body for children's services. The Council's role has now been downgraded to an advisory one and its major functions have been split between an Education Advisory Committee (administering pre-schools, out-of-school-hours programs and toy libraries) and a Child Care Advisory Committee (administering child care and related services). The South Australian government provides a small amount of funds for child care and this is used mainly to top up the continually eroding Commonwealth grants. Vacation and after school programs are funded through the Education Department of South Australia.

The **Tasmanian** government provides a small amount of funding for children's services through its Department of Social Welfare. These funds are mainly used to assist groups to reach a stage where they can apply for Commonwealth funding. Some funds have also been directed to areas where the Commonwealth does not provide assistance, for example transport subsidies.

Queensland and **Western Australia** provide no financial assistance to centre-based day care, family day care, out-of-school-hours programs or any other form of children's service besides pre-school.

In short it can readily be seen that State governments do not regard the provision of children's services (other than pre-schools) as their province. Two States are not involved at all in terms of funding, two make only a token commitment and the remaining two, New South Wales and Victoria, appear to regard their financial commitment more as a gesture of goodwill than as an acknowledgement of responsibility.

Local government

Local government authorities vary greatly in their capacity and willingness to support children's services. Enthusiastic councils can be of enormous assistance in promoting and sponsoring child care. In some parts of Australia local government plays a significant part in children's services. The proportion of Commonwealth funded projects sponsored by local authorities in each State is: Victoria, 40 per cent; Western Australia, 38 per cent; Tasmania, 29 per cent; New South Wales, 23 per cent; Queensland, 12 per cent and South Australia, 8 per cent. (41)

Local governments should be encouraged to play a role in planning and supporting children's services. However, although the claim is often made that local government is accessible and close to the people within its boundaries, it would be unwise to rely too heavily on its taking a major role in child care. For a start large parts of Australia do not have local government. It does not exist in the Australian Capital Territory or the Northern Territory and 85 per cent of South Australia is not incorporated into local government. (42)

Nor is local government necessarily small government either in terms of the number of its constituents or the geographical size of the area served. There is only one council for the whole of Brisbane and its suburbs, a city with over one million residents. Wiluna Shire in Western Australia is larger in area than the whole of Victoria. At the other extreme there are some local government areas with only a few hundred residents. These would have virtually no revenue raising capacity and could hardly be expected to play a significant role in the provision of any social services. (43)

In the early years of the Children's Services Program many councils, particularly those in urban areas, took on the sponsorship of family day care schemes and child care centres. Most envisaged their role as being to administer a grant and provide limited back-up services such as the cleaning of premises, clerical assistance and auditing. Some councils also sought funding from the Federal government for Children's Services Development Officers who could assist local residents to determine their own needs and lodge submissions.

Much of this early goodwill has been lost since 1976 because, as the value of the Commonwealth assistance had declined, councils have been forced to take on financial commitments which they did not anticipate and cannot afford. Their only alternative has been to close down services and thus deprive local people of vitally needed services. Councils who have been forced to take on the funding of child care services in this way will be exceedingly reluctant to extend their sponsorship of children's services in the future. If the Labor government wishes to re-establish local government as a partner in the development of services, it will need to index all recurrent grants and provide additional support such as funds for the employment of Children's Services Development Officers.

Controversial issues in policy and planning

Services for all or only for 'the needy'?

The question of whether child care services should be provided for all families who want them or restricted to those whom the government categorises as 'needy' has been debated extensively in recent years and will have to be addressed by the new Labor administration.

The policy developed by the previous Commonwealth government was that its funds should be directed towards certain categories of children. This policy remains in operation. Services funded under the Children's Services Program must give priority of access to:

- children from low income families
- children from single parent families
- children from families where both parents work
- migrant children
- children with sick or incapacitated parents
- isolated children
- Aboriginal children
- handicapped children
- children at risk of maltreatment.

In spite of this policy, three aspects of the development of the Children's Services Program have strongly militated against the interests of children in these categories.

- No attempt has been made to ensure that services are developed in high need areas. (This is discussed in detail in the following section.)
- The level of provision is totally inadequate to cater for those considered to be in need. A very high proportion of Australian children have at least one of the characteristics specified as giving priority of access to the Children's Services Program yet

only about 3.5 per cent of pre-schoolers are in government supported care.

- Under guidelines issued in late 1982 by the previous government (and currently under review by the new Labor administration) subsidies are paid only in respect of children from low income families even though children from all the nominated categories must be given priority of access. These guidelines make it very difficult for services to cater adequately for needy children. For example, specially trained staff are needed to work with handicapped children, and bi-lingual teachers are often required if migrant families are to be successfully integrated into services. At present, supplementary funding is not automatically made available for these purposes; it may be paid to a particular centre but this depends on the overall availability of funds.

There are strong reasons for providing services for all children and not attempting to restrict them to those whom the government says are needy. Surely families should be allowed to decide for themselves whether they 'need' child care? If child care provision were seen as a basic service available to all, parents could choose the hours of care which they required and the types of services which best suit their needs. At present, such a simple idea seems quite revolutionary!

Ironically, the concept of need when applied to child care planning and provision may work against the interests of disadvantaged children. As the authors of a recent book on this subject have noted, separate services for separate groups are socially divisive. Furthermore,

Low standards, inadequate resources and stigma are a recurrent risk in services for the most deprived and powerless groups: services for the poor can all too easily become poor services. (44)

In a country such as Australia children's services should be provided as a basic right for all children and all parents; they should not be seen as an unfortunate necessity reluctantly provided for a few. This is a long term goal, however, given the present low level of provision. In the meantime it is imperative that services be developed in areas of greatest need, that they be funded adequately so as to enable them to cater for those who have priority of access, and that overall funding be expanded so that more families in the various needs categories can be served and, ultimately, all children and families.

The allocation of funds: submissions vs planning

Ever since Commonwealth funds for children's services became available, allocations have been made solely on the basis of submissions from local groups. No Commonwealth government has

ever accepted responsibility for initiating services; nor has there been any attempt at the federal level to plan services on the basis of demographic information.

As a direct result of the submissions method of funding, pre-schools have received the bulk of the funds distributed to date. (45) Even though pre-schools' share of the total allocation has been reduced in recent years, overall they have received approximately 60 per cent of all Commonwealth funds. This is because pre-schools are seen as 'educational' and tend to be supported by well organised and powerful groups in the community as well as by State governments. By contrast child care services catering for the children of working mothers, migrants, and single parents and services such as general family support programs have generally been considered inferior and have fared less well in terms of funding.

The submissions model of distributing funds has been criticised on two main grounds. (46) First, it is entirely unacceptable that communities should have to compete with each other for child care funding — just as it would be unacceptable should they have to compete for funds for schools, hospitals or any other basic service. Secondly, funding on the basis of submissions has led to a grossly inequitable distribution of services. In most States, rural areas and those with high proportions of migrants, working mothers and low income families have been particularly disadvantaged. This pattern has been clearly documented in the study *Scarce for kids* which looks at the distribution of services in New South Wales. (47) Likewise a recent study of Tasmania shows that only twelve of the forty-nine local government areas in that State have received any funding for mainstream children's services (i.e. day care centres and family day care schemes). (48)

The tasks, responsibilities and expenses which have to be borne by groups seeking funding are very burdensome and constitute a further set of reasons why this approach to funding is unjust. A local committee which is seeking a capital grant must register as a co-operative, a charity or an incorporated company. This is time-consuming and expensive and the group must bear all costs whether or not the submission is successful. Other costs likely to be incurred can include 'surveys to establish the extent and kind of need, development applications, architectural advice and legal costs associated with the transfer of leases for land and buildings which must be met from committee resources and are not recoverable should the submission be unsuccessful'. (49)

The new Labor government is committed to abandoning the submissions model of funding and implementing a planning approach. The challenge it faces is how to carry this out without creating a cumbersome bureaucratic machine which is insensitive to local aspirations. One way around this may be to develop a two-phase system. The first phase would involve macro level

decisions about target levels of service provision, priorities for particular kinds of care and decisions about which areas would receive funds in any given year. Organisations such as the National Association of Community Based Child Care could participate in this phase. In the second phase, residents and workers from areas which had been allocated funds would be consulted about the sort of service they wanted, its management structure, the establishment procedures, etc. In this way local expertise would be used appropriately but there would not be any continuation of the competition between local groups to win funds from Canberra for their area.

The cost of child care: who should pay, how much and when?

At the present time fees in government sponsored child care services are very high. The charge for having a pre-school child cared for during normal working hours is \$40-\$60 per week, higher than the fees charged by elite private schools. While some parents pay reduced fees because they are considered needy on criteria established by the government, *66 per cent do not receive a fee rebate*. Only 8 per cent of children in government supported centres have two parents in employment *and* receive a fee rebate. (50)

Paying the full fee however is not the same as paying the full cost. Even parents paying the top amounts are being subsidised for between 10 per cent and 30 per cent of the full costs. Up till 1982 this was accepted by governments in recognition of the fact that decent quality child care is beyond the means of average families. When the *Child Care Act* was introduced in 1972 the government acknowledged that 'child care which was beneficial to the child's overall development was prohibitively costly for ordinary parents' and that the arrangements which they could afford 'fell short of the quality that was required in the interests of child welfare.' (51) In 1982, however, in line with its concern to reduce public sector expenditure, the Fraser government asserted its belief 'that the basic financial responsibility for children lies with the family . . . and it should pay for services in accordance with its means'. (52)

In accord with this philosophy new funding guidelines were issued by the Office of Child Care in late 1982. These were claimed by the then government to be designed to concentrate Commonwealth assistance on those who are most in need. However, many groups in the community argued that the effect of the new guidelines would be to substantially increase the fees payable by middle and low income families which would cause many of

them to be forced out of government sponsored services. These guidelines are currently under review by the new government.

Which members of the community should have their child care fees subsidised by the public purse? The Family and Children's Services Agency (a policy unit responsible to the New South Wales Minister for Youth and Community Services) has demonstrated that a household consisting of two adults and two children, with a combined income equivalent to male average weekly earnings, would have no surplus income above basic minimum living requirements. The budget on which this assessment was made is austere. It makes no allowance for child care, household insurance, hire purchase instalments, furniture, crockery, TV, radio, floor coverings, gifts, toys, alcohol, tobacco or recreation. For a family on such an income, the Agency has argued, 'paid child care, except on a very occasional basis, would be an unattainable luxury'. (53)

Child care costs are incurred by families at a stage in the life cycle when they are under considerable financial pressure. Many parents of young children are spending high proportions of their income on mortgage payments or rent. The costs of children themselves are also high. (54)

Rather than setting severe income tests and charging high fees to such families it would be more reasonable if child care services were financed by taxation revenue. This would still mean that the 'user pays' (most parents contribute significant amounts of their personal income in taxes), but the cost would be spread over the taxpayer's lifetime and also enable it to be shared by those who do not have children.

This policy has already been adopted by several countries which are comparable to Australia. In Sweden parents pay an average of 10 per cent of the full costs of care, in Hungary and West Germany the rate is about 15 per cent, and even in the United States the maximum parent fee in a government sponsored service is about 70 per cent of the full cost. (55) Subsidising parents for at least part of the cost of child care is a recognition of the fact that all members of society share responsibility for the next generation and will benefit from its productivity in their later years.

Tax concessions

Considerable attention has recently been given to the question of whether the child care expenses of working parents should be made tax deductible. The major argument in support of this proposal is that child care costs are a necessary expense for parents of young children who must earn an income and that they should be seen as at least as legitimate as business lunches or cars.

What would be the implications of implementing this proposal?

In the first place it would be of no benefit to those who require child care for reasons other than employment. Mothers at home, students and the unemployed would not be eligible for assistance as they are not earning an income. Nor would a deduction be available to those whose incomes fell below the taxable threshold -- for example, many part-time workers.

Another serious objection to tax deductions is that they are regressive: the higher one's income the higher the benefit. Take as an example three women in the paid workforce each paying \$50 per week for child care; one is a salaried business executive, one a teacher and one a part-time sales assistant. After claiming a deduction at the rate of 46 cents in the dollar the business executive will finally pay \$27 per week for child care; the teacher whose marginal tax rate is 35 cents in the dollar will outlay \$32.50 per week in the end; while the sales assistant (who, in this hypothetical example works part-time but needs full-time care because of the length of her journey to work) has an income below the tax threshold, is ineligible for any deductions and will have to pay the full \$50.

A system of tax deductions for child care expenses would be costly and would do nothing to address the fundamental problem which is the acute shortage of low cost, good quality children's services. Parents would still have to face the problems of finding reasonable child care and affording the fees in the first place.

Another problem relates to eligibility. If the deduction were available only in respect of registered services this would discriminate against the overwhelming majority of parents who are forced (by the lack of such services) to use informal, unlicensed arrangements. On the other hand if fees paid to private minders were allowable this would change the whole structure of the informal child care economy. At present most minders do not declare their income because of the possible loss of the dependent spouse rebate, pension benefits, etc. If it became necessary for them to do so then many would raise their charges to cover the other income or benefits which would be forfeited. As a result there would be no net benefit to the parents buying care in this way.

Finally, it is highly likely that the government would regard the revenue foregone in tax deductions as an indirect expenditure on children's services. This could lead to even further reductions in its capital and recurrent outlays thus preventing any further expansion of services.

As an alternative to tax deductions some people have suggested a system of tax rebates. Rebates can take various forms, but usually what is being suggested when they are counterposed to tax deductions in this way is that there be a standard rate of benefit (rather than one which varies with the marginal tax rate of

the individual). This aspect of the tax rebate idea overcomes the regressive features of tax deductions but there are still major flaws. Rebates are only payable to those who earn taxable incomes, and only those who pay tax to the full value of the rebate would receive the full benefit. Once again, pensioners, the unemployed and mothers at home would receive nothing, while those whose tax was assessed at an amount lower than the value of the rebate (mainly part-time workers) would receive only part of the benefit. Furthermore, the prospect of receiving a lump sum rebate twelve months after the expenses have been incurred is quite inadequate for those whose problem is meeting child care costs on a weekly basis.

Commercial child care

The question of what role (if any) commercial child care centres should play in an overall scheme of provision has never been resolved. At present well over 50% of the child care centres in Australia are run for profit. (56) They do not receive subsidies from the Federal government.

Under the previous (Liberal) Federal government a pilot project was launched to provide government subsidies which would enable low income children to attend commercial centres. The pilot project was vigorously opposed by the advocates of community based child care and was abandoned within weeks of the new government taking office.

The basic objection of the community child care lobby to public funds being used to subsidise profit-making centres is that children's services should be provided as a basic service for all families and should not be run for private gain. The needs of business and the needs of children are fundamentally incompatible. Profits in child care can only be made by minimising the costs of providing the service; that is by cutting down the number of staff employed and their qualifications or by reducing expenditure on food, toys and equipment. Although it is claimed that the government would carefully supervise the quality of care in the private centres the experience of giving subsidies to private nursing homes has not been encouraging.

The experience of North American governments which have subsidised commercial child care centres should also give Australian policy makers some concern. Studies in the United States and Canada have shown that day care chains and franchise businesses have proliferated in areas where public funds are available to private operators. (57) These businesses make money by keeping all outlays on staff, food, toys and equipment to a bare minimum and by strict adherence to a standardised formula in the delivery of services. Their structure makes it impossible for

them to be responsive to the needs of particular local areas; nor are they willing to share management decisions with parents and workers.

The Women's Trade Union Commission has shown that many private centres do not comply with the staff/child ratios which State regulations require and that they often employ young, untrained girls who are dismissed when they become eligible for adult wages. (58) As well as their obvious injustice to employees these practices undermine the stability and continuity of relationships between children and staff which are a vital component of high quality care.

Since private centres are run primarily as a business and only secondarily to provide a service to the community there is no guarantee that they will cater for groups with special needs — especially if it is costly to do so. In community based centres it is a condition of funding that priority of access be given to the children of single parents, recently arrived migrants, sick or incapacitated parents and those who are at risk of abusing their children. Most private centres do not offer a range of services catering for these groups. They do not, for example, employ bi-lingual migrant workers or special staff trained to work with disturbed children or those with handicaps.

The close involvement of parents in the management of the services which their children attend is one of the great strengths of public child care. The joint participation by parents and staff in decisions about the running of centres is a major guarantee of the quality of care received by the children. It is precisely because parents so often want to be closely involved in the services which their children use that private centres are an inappropriate way of meeting the need.

Work related children's centres

Many parents wish to use child care centres which are at or near their place of employment. Such centres give parents and children more time together while they travel to work and also enable parents to visit during their work breaks. The hours-of-work related children's centres can be geared to suit the needs of people in the area, for example, catering for shift workers.

Migrant workers in particular have expressed the desire to make use of work related child care. One Victorian study of female factory workers found that about three-quarters of the mothers surveyed stated that they would use a child care centre located at work. (59) In 1982, a research study into the child care needs of migrants living in inner Sydney suburbs found that 57.2 per cent would like child care near their workplace. (60) *The report*

of the review of post-arrival programs and services for migrants recommended that such services be given a high priority in Commonwealth government policy. (61)

Two major objections have been raised against work related child care. The first is the concern that it could be used by employers to manipulate their workforce and to depress wages and conditions. (62) The second is the argument that children should be cared for in their residential neighbourhood and should not have to travel to and from work with their parents. Let us consider each of these objections in turn.

Those who advocate the development of work related children's centres have in mind publicly funded and user/worker controlled services — here is no lobby to encourage employers to run their own private centres at the workplace! If an employer or developer contributed to the cost of construction of a centre, the recurrent costs (i.e. staff wages, equipment, subsidies, etc.) would be the responsibility of the Federal government and in no sense would the centre 'belong' to the employer. The possibilities for manipulation in these circumstances are minimal. Likewise, the fear that a child would lose his or her place at the centre should the parent resign or be dismissed can be overcome by an appropriate clause in the centre's constitution. An employer is in no position to determine which children may or may not use a publicly funded centre. Also, under guidelines laid down by the Commonwealth, centres must be open to children from the local area and not just the children of employees.

What of the objection that children should be cared for in the area in which they live and not where their parents work? Surely this is a decision which parents themselves should be able to make. Some people do not feel any particular ties to their neighbourhood and may not wish to be 'integrated' into a 'community'. They may instead have formed close relationships with their co-workers and feel that the bonds of commonality are stronger for them at the workplace than in their local area. For such people, having their children cared for near their work may be far more desirable than leaving them all day in a dormitory suburb with which they have few links.

Does work related child care turn small children into commuters? Possibly it does. But some children already have to be taken long distances to their place of care and many parents have to make extra long journeys to and from work because the child care centre (or private minder) is not on their direct route. Whether or not a longer journey is undesirable will depend on various factors including the type of transport used, the hours of the day that travel takes place and so on. In any case, surely this is a decision which families should be able to make for themselves rather than having their choices blocked off by someone else's decision about what is good for them.

Industrial Issues

Wages and conditions of child care workers

The industrial conditions of workers in community based children's services are largely determined by the level of government subsidies. Inadequate funding means low pay and poor working conditions for the staff and this in turn has repercussions for the children in care. The vast majority of workers in the child care industry are women; their level of unionisation is low and in the past many have been reluctant to organise to improve conditions. There is a growing realisation among child care staff, however, that industrial issues are closely linked in with issues of quality of care and access to care.

If workers in a child care centre are under stress because, for example, they have inadequate holiday breaks or are unable to take time off when they are ill, then their state will obviously affect the children.

Unsatisfactory working conditions result in situations where workers can do no more than just cope. They can provide a safe and somewhat stimulating environment, but they are unable to create the enriched experiences that they are trained to provide. Work that should be challenging and stimulating is instead frustrating and tiring. (63)

Thus, working conditions are directly related to the quality of care. Various structural features of the child care industry make it difficult for workers to organize to improve their conditions. One of these features is the large number of unions and awards which cover children's services staff depending on their qualifications, the type of service they are employed in, who their employer is and so on. In a small centre it is possible for each employee to belong to a different union. This can result in a situation where people working side by side and doing similar work can have vastly different entitlements.

Although different pay scales can be justified on the grounds of qualifications, training and experience, some effort needs to be made to ensure that the conditions of employment within services are made more equitable. One researcher reported a centre where the five staff members were covered by five different awards and their sick leave entitlements varied from eleven to thirty-three days per year, although as she commented, 'the germs were the same!'(64) Holidays vary even more dramatically with teachers frequently being eligible for six to ten weeks annual leave while nurses, child care certificate workers and untrained staff receive only four weeks.(65) In some centres there is no paid annual leave: staff are laid off for a given number of weeks and then re-employed.

When services are underfunded workers may not even be able to receive their award wages and entitlements. In New South Wales, community based organisations joined with commercial employers in 1982 to mount an 'incapacity to pay' case in the Industrial Court. The community groups claimed that they were unable to pay their workers' recently granted award increases because of the inadequacy of government subsidies.

Underfunding of children's services is not only unjust to workers and indirectly damaging to children, it is also a factor in determining who gets access to services. In situations where there is a shortfall between the subsidies received from government and the costs of operating a service the difference must be made up by fund raising and increased fees.

A study of occasional care services has shown how this situation works to exclude poor families. Many occasional care centres have a policy that parents can either pay in cash or give their time in return for child care. In practice, however, many centres have had to discourage payment in kind because of the need to recoup as much cash as possible to meet basic running expenses. (66)

Staff/child ratios within children's services are set by State and Territory regulations. Yet services never receive a level of subsidy which is sufficient to pay the wages of that number of staff. This places workers in a no-win situation. They can either work more hours than they are paid for, thereby effectively lowering their rate of pay; or else rely on unpaid workers (volunteers), thereby undercutting their own position in the labour market.

Volunteers . . . or conscripts?

The underfunding of children's services has resulted in most forms of care being supported by vast numbers of unpaid female workers. In some services up to 85 per cent of the staff work for no wages. (67) Although these workers are euphemistically labelled volunteers, in many instances women are obliged to give their

labour for free as a condition of the use of the service, often in addition to paying fees.

Unpaid labour of this kind is quite different from the assistance which may be provided through parental participation. It is one thing to offer parents the opportunity to become involved in the services which are for their children but quite another to build into funding formulae the requirement that women will work for no pay.

Many women use the experience of working unpaid in child care as a stepping stone on the way to a paid job. However, as Carole Deagan has pointed out in her excellent discussion of the ramifications of unpaid labour in children's services, 'people who are doing a regular job which they enjoy, are capable of and valued for, should not have to move out of it merely in search of a wage'. Furthermore, child care centres should be seen primarily as services for children, not job training centres for adults.(68)

A fair deal for family day care minders

Undoubtedly the most under-rewarded of all paid workers in the child care field are family day care minders. Although the rates of pay vary between schemes, most caregivers receive less than one dollar per hour for each child they look after. Thus the average caregiver who minds two children is likely to be working a forty or fifty hour week for less than eighty dollars. Overtime rates in family day care are either non-existent or absurdly low — in some schemes twenty cents per hour.(69)

As to the working conditions of family day care minders, the Working Women's Centre in Melbourne has summarised the situation thus:

The woman works in isolation with little back-up services apart from visits by the local council Family Day Care co-ordinator. The woman performs this work without the protection of basic conditions that other workers are entitled to. She does not have lunch or morning tea breaks, she works in isolation without communication with other workers. Most of these women do not get holidays, public holidays or sick pay; there is seldom provision for workers' compensation or insurance.(70)

Family day care is organised as a series of private contracts between parents and caregivers. In a few family day care schemes the sponsoring agency collects fees from parents and pays wages to minders; in most schemes parents pay the caregivers directly. As there is no government contribution towards their wages the caregivers know that a pay increase for them means a fee increase for parents and many parents can barely afford the existing fees.

The only way to ensure a measure of justice for family day care minders is to break this direct relationship between fees and wages. A government subsidy needs to be paid to ensure that all

minders receive a fair wage. There is no reason why women caring for other people's children in their homes should be paid less than, say, untrained assistants in child care centres. It should also be possible for these minders to attend training courses and to become part of an employment structure in which they could advance, transferring to work in centres if they wished to do so.

The payment of reasonable wages and the integration of home-based caregivers with staff in centres would provide important incentives to unregistered childminders to join family day care. Another benefit likely to result would be a reduction in the high turnover rate of minders (which is currently a major concern). As with staff in child care centres, the improvement of industrial conditions for family day care workers is closely tied to the quality of care received by the children.

Recommendations: Towards a national child care policy

The issues and problems discussed in this paper indicate the urgent need for the development of a national child care policy based on a recognition of the changes which have occurred within Australian families over recent decades and the diverse needs of parents and children. The following proposals are put forward as a suggested basis for a national policy and program. They are practical measures rather than visionary ideals and are intended to suggest ways in which national resources could be used to rapidly expand child care provision while at the same time retaining the goals of local assessment of need and user/staff management of services.

1 Delineation of the Commonwealth government's role in the provision of child care

A first step towards the development of a national child care policy for Australia must be a clear announcement by the Commonwealth government concerning the role it intends to take in planning, funding and establishing child care services. The Commonwealth's position on these issues has varied considerably over the past decade depending upon the political complexion of the government. For the past seven years the Commonwealth has been retreating from a major role in policy and funding and it is vital that the new government make clear its position. Federal ALP policy states that 'access to community child care is a right' — how does the government intend to translate this policy into practice?

2 Amendment or repeal of the *Child Care Act*

The *Child Care Act* (1972) is the only specific legislative basis for funding children's services in Australia. However, in many re-

spects it is inappropriate for the range of services which are now required. The only form of care which can be funded under the Act is centre-based long day care. Other services such as pre-schools, family day care, out-of-school-hours programs, etc. fall outside the provisions of the Act and are funded under a variety of 'special arrangements' (block grants, special ministerial determinations and so on). If we are to have a coherent national approach to child care there must be appropriate federal legislation which applies to *all* forms of care.

3 Development of target levels of child care provision and commitment of sufficient funds to enable these targets to be met

The government should set targets for the development of child care services and relate these to its overall policies. This would involve setting priorities between particular service types, target groups, and areas of Australia. The annual allocation to children's services should include a specific amount for the development of new projects.

4 Planning of services

The submissions system under which groups compete with each other for child care funds must be abandoned. In a situation of scarce resources (and they would still be very scarce even if funding were increased to the level suggested above), it is incumbent upon the government to make fair and rational decisions — on the basis of publicly announced criteria — about which areas are to receive funds. Once the allocations have been decided, details about what type of service to provide, how it should be set up should be decided by local residents and workers. However there should be built-in safeguards to ensure that minority views such as those of working mothers, migrants and Aboriginal people are heard and acted upon. While services for all children and parents should be seen as the ultimate policy goal, in the meantime it is important that services are developed first in areas of greatest need.

Centres should be multi-purpose whenever possible, but care should be taken to ensure that services for groups who have previously been neglected are given priority. These would include:

- long day care
- care for 0-2 year olds
- services for migrant and Aboriginal families
- services for country families
- 24 hour services for shift workers (including work related care)
- services for handicapped children.

5 Extension of services offered by pre-schools

Pre-schools are the most under-utilised resource in children's services. They are closed by 3 p.m. each day, closed during school holidays, and when operating, offer only sessional care to three and four year olds. In some country towns because of the small number of children in the year before school entry a fully equipped pre-school may be open for only two mornings per week. Also, some pre-schools tend to see the needs of four year olds as separate from the needs of the rest of their families. Thus a parent with a child attending pre-school must find another service to care for a toddler on an occasional basis and still another service for after-school-care for an older child.

The artificial distinction between pre-school and day care in current funding and licensing regulations makes it impossible for pre-schools to extend their hours or cater for younger children. Yet to build a new centre for day care may cost up to \$250 000. This irrational, wasteful division should be strongly discouraged by the federal government — instead of perpetuated in its funding categories as at present. Likewise every effort should be made to encourage the use of school buildings outside school hours and during vacations. Many community buildings (halls, baby health centres, etc.) could also be used for children's services.

6 Rationalisation of regulations and licensing requirements across Australia

Other than funding categories the major barrier to the development of flexible services is the fact that State government regulations require each service type (long day care, pre-school, etc.) to have a separate license and meet different regulations. Multi-purpose services are very difficult to develop when the administrative framework is so rigid. Every effort should therefore be made by the Commonwealth to assume responsibility for regulating children's services and to develop a national licensing system which would genuinely encourage flexibility in the use of services.

7 Adequate funding of existing services to ensure adequate wages and conditions and do away with the requirement for 'volunteer' workers

As well as providing funds for the development of new services it is essential that all existing services receive sufficient funds to meet award wages and conditions. This would also obviate the need for unpaid labour. This is not to say that parental participation would not be welcome in centres, but it should not be

required to be present and should not be used to undercut the labour market for child care workers.

8 Automatic funding for special needs

It is impossible for centres to plan to employ bi-lingual staff or to integrate handicapped children into their programs while funding for these services is discretionary. Funding for these services must be an automatic component so that these groups can be adequately catered for.

Policy statements concerning 'priority of access' to particular disadvantaged groups are quite hollow unless backed up by sufficient funds.

9 Cost of services

Government sponsored services must be subsidised so that the cost does not exclude low and middle income earners. The current subsidy arrangements are based on unrealistic assessments of family expenditure and fail to recognise the cost of living. They assume that families on very modest incomes will be able to pay up to \$60 per week for one child in care. Yet this is higher than the cost of tuition in private schools — something which is recognised as the province of a privileged minority. Fees in government subsidised child care services should be kept to a minimum and payment scales must be worked out having regard to actual expenditure patterns in particular localities.

Notes and references

- 1 See Tania Sweeney and Adam Jamrozik, *Services for young children: welfare service or social parenthood?*, Kensington Social Welfare Research Centre, University of NSW, Reports and Proceedings No. 19, 1982, p.111. The authors stress that their estimates must be regarded only as approximations.
- 2 Sheila B. Kamerman and Alfred J. Kahn, *Child care, family benefits, and working parents: a study in comparative policy*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1981; gives details of the benefits and facilities provided in the Federal Republic of Germany, France, Sweden, German Democratic Republic, Hungary and the United States. All of these countries have higher levels of child care provision than Australia.
- 3 Australian Labor Party, *Platform, constitution and rules as approved by the 35th National Conference*, Canberra: 1982. The section of the platform relating to children's services is reproduced as Appendix 1 of this Policy background paper.
- 4 All statistics in this section, unless otherwise stated, are from ABS *Child care arrangements, Australia, June 1980*, Cat. No. 4402.0.
- 5 The finding that a high proportion of children are being cared for by their fathers (i.e. spouse of the person responsible) should be interpreted cautiously and not used to suggest that any radical changes are being made in the sexual division of labour. Many of these men may be caring for sleeping children while their wives work night shift, for example. Studies have consistently shown that even where wives are employed full-time outside the home they still bear major responsibility for housework and child care outside of these hours (see e.g. Graeme Russell, 'The role of fathers in child development: an Australian perspective', in *Children, the community's concern*, Proceedings of the 15th National Conference of the Australian Pre-School Association, Canberra: APA, 1980, pp.55-64).
- 6 Note that the discrepancy between this number (5300) and the number given in Figure 1 for 'other arrangements' (7400) is accounted for by the fact that the latter includes children at organised activities (e.g. music lessons). ABS (1980) Table 16 gives the information that 5300 of these children are left by themselves.
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- 14 Owens and Shaw, *Working women*, *op. cit.*, p. 39; the finding that wives in low income earning households contribute a high proportion of total household income is confirmed in ABS (1982), *Income distribution, Australia 1978-1979: income units*, Cat. No. 6523.0, p.27.
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- 16 Jan Harper and Lyn Richards, *Mothers and working mothers*, Melbourne: Penguin, 1979.
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- 19 Margaret Power, 'Part-time work and women', in *Part-time work . . . is it the answer?*, *op. cit.*, p.47.
- 20 Mary Jo Bane, *Here to stay: American families in the twentieth century*, New York: Basic Books, 1976.
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- 22 Sweeney and Jamrozik, *Services for young children*, *op.cit.*, state that the overall use of care does not vary greatly between the children of Australian born parents and those whose parents were not Australian born (p.25). However, their usage of Commonwealth funded services is significantly lower than the rest of the population (p.110). Again the authors stress that these results must be regarded only as approximations.
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Appendix: Federal ALP policy on child care

A children's services program under a Federal Labor government will provide services for children 0 to 15 which complement the care they receive from parents. Access to community child care is a right, and the aim of such care is to provide all children with developmental and social activities in safe surroundings provided by skilled and caring people for the range of hours which meets the children's needs and those of their parents/carers. Children's services should be federally-funded and community-based and should be financed by subsidies rather than tax deductions or rebates.

This will be achieved by:

- Allocating resources on a planning model based on needs rather than the present submission-based model which favours the articulate.
- Negotiating agreements with states and territory administrations on an overall planned distribution of capital and recurrent contributions — including consideration of those contributions made by community groups and local government authorities.
- Moving towards a program based on multi-purpose centres at the local level or other appropriate sites such as the workplace. Such centres will provide long day care, sessional services, full day care, occasional care, family day care and shift care, where appropriate. Provision will be made for out of school hours care for those children of school age. Where possible such services will be integrated under one management and share staff resources.
- Providing an overall subsidy to all approved non-profit services, which will guarantee quality care and which will allow services to be provided at a cost that can be met by a majority of users. The subsidy will be linked to approved staff salaries and

indexed to cover compulsory wage rises. Additional needs payments will be provided so that all children can have access.

- Planning and funding the provision of services for minority groups which meet the special needs of such groups in terms of language, culture and special needs.
- Providing additional funding, where necessary, to integrate disabled and other children with problems into normal programs, or providing separate services for such children where appropriate.
- Ensuring that the users of a service take part in the management of the service so that a service reflects the real and varied needs of the users.
- Providing the incentives for the better use of existing resources so that expansion of services can be made without unnecessary additional capital expenses.

Source: Australian Labor Party, *1982 platform, constitution and rules*, Canberra: ALP, 1982 pp. 158-9.